

wnet/13

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To  
The Rockefeller Foundation  
A Report and a Proposal  
on the  
WNET TELEVISION LABORATORY

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## I. THE GRANT REQUEST

The Educational Broadcasting Company (WNET/13) seeks a grant in the amount of \$550,000 from The Rockefeller Foundation to be used in support of the operating budget and the activities of its Television Laboratory over the next three years (calendars 1973, 1974 and 1975).

It is understood by EBC/WNET that less than (but no more than) \$250,000 of such a grant could be expended in any one year during the three years of the grant period, providing other funding were found to fulfill the budget.

## II. THE FIRST EIGHT MONTHS

The Laboratory was established by an operating budget grant from The Rockefeller Foundation. The New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts have funded specific projects and equipment purchases.

On February 1, 1972 the Lab began research, development and planning, and the acquisition and installation of equipment. In May of this year the Lab began its video experimentation, as well as the construction of its own video-synthesizer. Work on the synthesizer was completed in July. Experimental project activity will continue under the present grant until the end of this year.

During the first eight months of the Lab's operation, we specifically kept as broad a focus as possible on the scope of the various projects undertaken. In order to keep that wide perspective, it was necessary to place little emphasis on broadcast programming since such efforts would have required allocating large segments of our fairly limited production budget to what could only have been a very few small projects. Before doing so it was necessary to take a general look from which we might find a specific focus for investigation and

experimentation which felt most uniquely and comfortably our own.

The short but intense history of experimental video has had few overviews from a laboratory vantage point. Our experiences ranged from the purely technical investigative possibility of laser beams or complete audio-video feedback systems, to video satire, exercises in dramatic fantasy and narrative forms, and the innovative "double channel" experiments which use two TV monitors with different but related pictures to extend the impact of TV viewing.

Encompassing such huge and sometimes divergent concepts as "television," and "art," the Lab made several forays into technological research, but also was committed to investigating applications of existing technologies that heretofore have only had abstract expression. Some interesting pieces resulted from the Lab's opening its doors to artists during certain periods of the half-year. This artist-access resulted from a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts, and the work it produced complemented the major body of work undertaken by the Lab.

Our message at this point has been primarily a recognition of the immense variety of ways in which experimentation can go, yet even with our great variety we have

had to be selective, confronted by a virtually infinite set of choices. By implication, our experiments, and more important some of our results have pointed the way toward at least a few directions that unquestionably can reap great creative rewards. In watching video gradually mature, our loyalty has been both to the artists and to the public who need them.

#### A.

An itemization of the Lab's projects is most useful in understanding the nature of our inquiries.

What are the communication possibilities of the sixty second message? One of the true creations of television, the "commercial" is so called because it is used to sell products. Yet the impact of such messages is vast as evidenced by the seemingly endless supply of catch phrases and slogans that work their way into general usage in the culture. "Sesame Street" was the first indication that the one-minute form can be used for radically different purposes, and some public service spots have played around with the form as a means of helping specific social situations. In commissioning Ted Carpenter, humanist, anthropologist and protege of Marshall McLuhan, the Lab wanted to find out if the compact format could transmit a complex idea as well as selling a product.

Such a form can have immediate usefulness to educational TV which like commercial TV has station breaks to fill between the scheduled programs.

Carpenter's piece, shot on 16mm color film, deals with social changes in sensory perception, especially the opening up of man's visual facility. Professionally shot and edited with the same standard of excellence required for regular commercials, the piece offers great hope that such a form can be developed.

The use of immediate feedback between artist and product inherently possible with videotape and television exceeds that of any other medium. Frank Cavestani's "Body Music" is a unique application of the video technology in utilizing the feedback potential. Using dancers as the source of video image, he set up an audio system where the soundtrack was generated by the video amplitude of the picture. The dancers, by their movements alone, were creating both the audio and the visual signals which Cavestani then colorized and electronically altered. The product is one of the most interesting manifestations of conceptual feedback yet created, and the electronic set-up which was designed specifically for this piece has many possible future applications.

In one of the more ambitious ventures of the Lab,

we commissioned filmmaker and artist Shirley Clarke to explore the possibilities of film chain, chroma key, color camera and multiple feeds, in relation to her own choreographed sequences. She created seven segments, loosely related as vignettes to her general fantasy concept. Her personal visions found new life in the electron technology; her use of video imagery gave new expression to traditional themes such as Adam and Eve, the Circus, and the modern nostalgia of Busby Berkeley dance numbers. Unfinished, her work has many sections which demonstrate the esthetic use of video effects which previously have been used mainly in gimmicky commercial terms.

Application of new video technology to a truly classical artistic theme gave rise to "Still Life," a 20-minute creation of Russell Conner. Beginning with a standard simple shot of a bouquet of flowers backed by a soundtrack of sugary string instrumental, Conner altered the image by a series of overlays, and then made a dramatic shift into a colorized image which changed the feeling of the piece from static to motion. The mood change is accompanied by a music change from slow to fast. Alternating between these two moods, Connor shows an astounding range of permutations of the original picture, resulting in an altogether re-animated version of the



theme that somehow belies its title.

Douglas Davis, like Conner, a long time practitioner of experiemntal video art, made two 30-minute pieces for the Lab, "Experiments in Color #1 and #2." The first one is a straightforward use of color abstraction using numerals as the focus for image change. The second "Experiments in Color" is an ultimate piece of conceptual art, bordering on a video happening:

A television set was placed in the middle of a New York City sidewalk. The broadcast channels of the set were constantly switched and their juxtaposition served to make an ironic comment on commercial TV. The piece was taped during the half hour of dusk and the visual impact adds to the eeriness and beauty.

It is sometimes impossible to divorce the video artist from the techniques available to him. Computer graphics equipment, which can create extremely sophisticated images, has been used almost exclusively up till now for TV commercials. The Lab Commissioned Ed Emshwiller to investigate the artistic potential of this equipment and Dolphin Productions generously made available their facilities for a day. The result of that day "Computer Experiments #1" has now been recognized as one of the most extraordinary pieces of video art to date. Based on this experience, the Lab was able to approach the National Endowment on the Arts for a matching grant to allow Mr. Emshwiller to embark on a full fledged pro-

ject to be completed by early December 1972. (A similar matching grant from the Arts Endowment enabled Shirley Clarke to work on her project.)

Emshwiller's imagery truly defies description, but it is one of the few pieces of video art that has met with virtually universal acclamation. Its striking and novel use of color and form is edited into a highly original dramatic structure complemented well by the original soundtrack by Robert Moog.

Investigation into the visual application of the laser beam to video pictures resulted in a piece by Bill Etra. To achieve the control and manipulation of the laser beam, it was bounced off a pool of mercury directly into the vidicon tube. The ensuing image was manipulated by means of an audio signal passing directly through the mercury. Though no more than a ten-minute experiment in texture, it may herald a whole new vista of technology available to video artists.

Taka Immura made two pieces under that portion of the New York State Council on the Arts grant that made available time at the Lab for artists in the New York community for free. Immura's "BCR," is a very subtle exercise in changing color and his "Video Calligraphy" is a self explanatory series of fast moving images of

Japanese calligraphy. Both were originally shot in film and transferred to videotape. (Other artists who used the Lab in conjunction with the New York State Council on the Arts grant were Cavestani, Davis and Jud Yalkut.)

The Lab put together a one-hour broadcast program called "Televisions," which was aired on WNET as its contribution to the NYSCA funded series "Carousel." It was a presentation of two of the most radical departures in experimental television, the new highly specialized technology that has produced most of the video art of the last several years, and the "porta-pac," a lightweight portable cheap video system which was given to a New York street gang who learned its use after a half hour, and then had a weekend to produce the material that was used on this program. Interposed between sections of the porta-pac tape were excerpts from several pieces of video art, in roughly chronological order to give a mini-history of the video art movement. Included were segments of material from the WGBH Rockefeller Artists in Television program, the National Center for Experiments in Television in San Francisco and material that had been presented on the public television network and the BBC. "Televisions" was culminated with Nam June Paik's "The Selling of New York," a new seven-minute piece that was produced at the

Lab. Paik's piece is another triumph for the brilliant "father of video" who co-invented the video synthesizer used at the Lab. It is Paik's first work that incorporates a spoken narrative (used ironically) and it includes Paik's usual trademarks of spectacular video imagery and demonic wit. By using Japanese TV commercials in unexpected counterpoint, to the body of the work, Paik conveys a satiric vision of global television.

A major goal of the Lab was to develop the use of video special effects in narrative forms. David Silver, Jonathan Price, and Bill Etra collaborated in bringing to video life five stories, "Silence," by Edgar Allan Poe, which takes twelve minutes, "Pele," a Hawaiian myth that lasts four minutes, "Blake," a four minute meta-physical biography of William Blake, "Freud," a four minute visionary portrait of the psychiatrist and "Coyote," a six minute version of an American Indian religious tale which uses rock music as a soundtrack. The pieces are all related to the supernatural, an area where video technology is particularly useful in dramatic communication. Says Silver, "We're anxious to end this distinction between abstract and non-abstract. There's no reason why these marvellous machines of Paik and others should be limited to use in any one form of expression."

Many artists working with video have felt a connection between the pure electronic images and their concept of God. Jud Yalkut is one of the few who confronts this feeling directly artistically as he does in "The Astrolabe of God." Using African drums as well as synthesized image alterations, Yalkut's twenty minute piece has much of the depth implied by its title.

The most broadcast-oriented experiments of the Lab are the "Double Channel" pieces for which notable playwrights were asked to compose dramas that would involve the use of two separate television pictures and sounds to be broadcast simultaneously. The viewer would receive the program on two TV sets tuned to different channels. The two sets could be physically arranged any way that the author indicated. The goal of the "Double Channel" pieces is to use the television medium in a new way, greatly expanding the range of communication and also creating a new spatial environment, a form of video theatre, in the viewer's home. They enlarge the viewer's concept of television, and heighten his consciousness regarding the medium. Furthermore, by offering the viewer a choice of pictures on which to focus attention the pieces involve him in decisions which normally are made by a director.

"Boxes," a "Double Channel" piece written by Corinne Jacker, is a satiric simultaneous presentation of life in two adjacent apartments in a typical New York high rise building. The TV set on the left shows a man and his girlfriend, on the right shows the man's ex-wife, who because of rent control, still is forced to live there. The farce is based on the concept of presenting the viewer a simultaneous look at two separate physical locations.

"Are You There," is Jean Claude van Itallie's "Double Channel" Pirandellian exercise in which two women jump from set to set teasing the audience visually and verbally and raising the question "have they created the viewer or has the viewer created them?"

Leonard Melfi wrote "What a Life" for "Double Channel." It is a satiric imagistic comedy that views love and romance from childhood to old age.

A "Double Channel" piece was produced for the Lab in Boston by Fred Barzyk and WGBH called "The Yin and Yang of It." It stars comedians Bob and Ray who are also the hosts of the entire "Double Channel" program. Taking as its premise the idea that if one hundred million Japanese jumped off a one foot high platform at the same time, that California would float loose into the Pacific Ocean, the piece portrays Bob and Ray in their familiar

roles of newscasters reporting in two separate locations on the ensuing events of the disaster that is about to transpire.

"Double Channel" is being created for broadcast during late November or early December of this year on Channel 13 and a commercial channel.

### III. THE NEXT THREE YEARS

#### A.

Having gone through the first half-year with a wide and far flung perspective, the Lab is now prepared to define its role in more specific terms. A major goal of the Lab will now be to instill a broadcast discipline in its products; this will be reflected in both the technical and creative approaches to the future experimentation.

The Lab will continue to be a place for research, for exploring new ideas related to television. As a television Lab, it will continue to participate and hopefully stimulate the growth of the station. In ideas and technology both the health of the Lab and the health of the station will be heightened by the Lab's increased visibility and broadcast consciousness, although the Lab will continue to follow its own path of research, independent of any program obligations. While the Lab will not be motivated by broadcast requirements, it is crucial that the products have the potential of broadcast, so that the station can benefit from the Lab, and so that each project can have a more clearly defined frame of reference within which to work.



While it is not realistic to expect a detailed prospectus for three years of activity, the following physical and creative plans will clearly be the basis for the next year, and will set the general direction for the entire three years.

### B.

Immediate change is needed in Studio 46 to facilitate both the creative and technical aspects of the broadcast discipline previously referred to.

One essential change is to restructure the space so that an individual artist can have privacy when working with the video synthesizer, and other equipment. The artist must be able to work without interruption, yet the equipment must also be easily connectable to the entire studio set-up which will allow several artists to work together, to "mix" their creative inputs if it is so desired. Overall, Studio 46 must be restructured in more human terms, terms which are relevant to the specific goals of the Lab. It must be turned into the optimum environment for efficient experimentation and productivity. Most videotapes are the result of collaborations between artists and technicians, and the present layout of the studio handicaps such collaborations rather than facilitating them.

Several equipment modifications and additions are needed by the Lab to fulfill the technical aspects of its goals. The New York State Council on the Arts, anticipating the continuation of the Lab, has already granted \$50,000 for such equipment and work is already under way. In general, the improvements are for quality control of the picture; the synthesizer alterations will result in an improved clarity of the image-converted signal. Another project in the works is the purchase and interface of a Buchla audio synthesizer. Two new Shibaden color cameras have been purchased, and they will provide a broadcast quality image. Funding also is being sought to buy a larger more comprehensive switcher-mixer. Together the physical and equipment improvements will result in a humanized work environment and a level of technical excellence which will heighten creative potential and also allow broadcastability.

### C.

The creative energies of the TV Lab in the foreseeable future will fall into three interrelated categories.

#### 1. Perceptual Experimentation

In a continued drive to research and experiment in the area of video, the Lab will concentrate energy on

categorizing, analyzing and evaluating the new and old forms of presenting television imagery.

One prominent aspect of this study will be to determine the physical properties of the TV image itself. McLuhan wrote much about TV as a "cool" medium, and it is common knowledge that the line presentation of the television picture is very different from the photographic picture of film, yet little investigation has gone into identifying the exact effects of watching TV. Working from both a physical and psychological point of view the Lab will endeavor to find the physiological effect of video, how it works on the retina, the brain, the metabolism, etc. Specialists in the sciences would be sought to join in these experiments.

The psychological effects of TV will be analyzed, e.g. does TV stimulate or subdue creativity in children? Does video expand consciousness by its physical electronic form and texture? How is television most effective? This will be an examination of TV's specific powers.

Another aspect of this study will be further experimentation with lasers, and in particular holography. Three dimensional TV imagery and large screen projections are now technologically possible, yet very little utilization of these capabilities has been achieved. The Lab

will experiment with these new technologies to determine their range and their applicability to other aspects of TV.

There will be perceptual and sensory work involving WNET's educational programs for in-school use. WNET/13's Education Division is planning the creation of a television series on aesthetic education, to be produced in co-operation with Cemrel, Inc. (one of America's finest educational laboratories) and Lincoln Center.

The series is designed for in-school utilization and home viewing by 4-to-10-year-olds, although it is anticipated that older children and adults will find the programs interesting and enjoyable.

The series will be based upon the arts and will seek to cultivate and develop the sensibilities and capabilities for aesthetic judgment within the viewer. During the R&D Period, the resources of the Television Laboratory at WNET/13 would be used in developing the design of the series and in the production of several pilot segments to be used for testing and evaluating the reactions of children.

Finally there will be the pure research of attempting to define the range of the massive new video technology that encompasses all of these things and other areas where

the Lab has worked in the past. Woody and Steina Vesulka, video artists, inventors and experts on the potential variety of video effects will be commissioned to help coordinate this process of definition. Either a written or video "catalogue" of video imagery may result from this study. At least the beginnings of such an effort will be achieved to make the video experiments of the last several years definable, and as much as possible, accessible to artists, broadcasters and the public. This research fills a crucial need for gathering and organizing technical information which until now has not been synthesized.

## 2. Broadcast Transmission Experimentation

Technology today tends to alienate the public. Creative use of technology has the exact opposite effect.

It is obvious that television is the most powerful information tool yet devised, yet broadcast TV has missed, thus far, the way in which to use itself most fully. Satellite TV seems to be restricted to sport and international crisis. Even for news the communicative power of the global broadcast is often atrophied by unimaginative use -- your major network newsreporter in his raincoat giving you a report on China holding his microphone, acting as

an "interpreter" of what the cameras could show you for themselves. The visionary, essentially non-political, global view of communication and co-operation of a Buckminster Fuller can be realized best by the initiation of a new global attitude -- via television -- for the positive purpose of humanitarianism through inter-relationships.

All this is by way of introduction to the Lab's place in this use of TV technology for increasing awareness not through didacticism or propaganda. If the Lab is to actually do broadcast work it should experiment with expanding concepts of broadcasting itself.

"Interconnect," is one of the Lab's proposed broadcast projects. It is designed to use the television medium to its fullest capability in contrast to its ordinary relegation to distributing pre-filmed programs. Actually only during live programming does TV fulfill its unique technological potential and the purpose of "Interconnect" is to combine live transmissions from New York, Boston and San Francisco at the same time. By linking these three centers of experimental television, "Interconnect" will have the cities interacting and taking turns during transmission. Phone calls may be incorporated into the concept as well to give the audience in the three cities some input into the proceedings. By returning

non-crisis excitement to TV, such a program will begin to find what television's real potential may be.

The Lab will initiate many other broadcast experiments including a continuation of the "Double Channel" experiments. Part of our commitment is to constantly redefine the meaning of broadcasting with the advent of new creative technology. We are also concerned with the problem of viewer passivity and will undertake experiments involving two-way TV communication -- Channel 13 to the viewer via TV, and the viewer to Channel 13 via telephone.

Another project for the next year will be "Suite 212," the forthcoming product from Nam June Paik who will continue his residency with the Lab. "Suite 212" will be the ultimate synthesis of inputs. It will consist of a series of from ten to twenty pieces each of which will be from two to ten minutes long. Each piece will treat a different geographical section of New York, usually focusing on a landmark or an historically interesting subject. Paik will combine on location tapes of the subject historic photographs, interviews, and other inputs and will mix it all through his synthesizer resulting in a new vision of New York City. The pieces will be individually broadcast on WNET as station breaks, "rear bumpers," etc.

With Ted Carpenter, the Lab has already investigated the potential of the 60-second format for selling ideas rather than products. The communication possibilities of this form will continue to be examined and explored by the Lab in coming years.

### 3. Dramatic Video Forms Experimentation

With the exception of a few brief years, new dramatic and related narrative forms have had little chance to be developed on television. What has been broadcast has consisted primarily of television adaptations of plays written for the stage or else has consisted of mini feature films written by screenwriters who have approached the medium of television solely as a form of distribution for films.

And yet, when the videowriter has been fortunate enough to write specifically for television the results have usually been extraordinary.

For instance, American theatre has undergone vast changes in the last ten years, yet virtually none of these changes have been expressed through television. In fact the theatrical and television aesthetics in this country have been almost completely separate. This is in contrast to England, for instance, where such important drama as Harold Pinter's "The Birthday Party" was



originally produced for the BBC. Most of the best recent American drama, as exemplified by Joseph Papp's Public Theatre, or La Mama, has evolved a new relationship between playwright, director and actor whose creative functions are becoming more merged than before. Because the Lab is free to experiment, we can create the same kind of environment and extend it to video, using such tools as the synthesizer, colorizer etc. We will be searching for new boundaries in dramatic expression, expanding the definitions of television drama.

Drawing upon the rich and varied resources of playwriting talent available in New York, a small nucleus of writers would be formed at the Lab. This group might include the following: Jean Claude van Itallie, Israel Horowitz, Megan Terry, Leonard Melfi, Jules Feiffer, Jeff Wanschel, Terence McNally, Lanford Wilson, Kurt Vonnegut, Donald Barthelme and Clark Gessner. Each of these in his work has shown a desire to push the boundaries of dramatic expression by presenting their ideas in new and extraordinary form.

These would be joined by directors from television and theatre such as Fred Barzyk, A. J. Antoon, Brooks Jones, Tim Mayer, Gerald Freedman, Jeff Blechner and David Dow.

These writers would be complimented by the inclusion of several video artists as Nam June Paik, Ed Emshwiller and Stephen Beck.

An intensive series of meetings and discussions among the entire group would be followed by a series of exercises examining in dramatic terms the potential of the medium and the technology. During this period several "mixes" of participants would evolve, traditional roles would break down and new creative collaborations would evolve. Over a period of several weeks in the Lab a project would be developed under the guidance of the Lab's Director with additional members such as lighting directors and other video specialists, etc. being added to the nucleus as was needed.

It is not intended that these be full length works. They are primarily short artistic exercises attempting to evolve a new video form...an attempt to examine for the first time on a sustained basis the narrative dramatic possibilities inherent in much of the extraordinary work and techniques evolved by the video artists over the past several years.

It is an attempt to establish a new art form -- videodrama -- which will have its own unique set of values, forms, imagery and aesthetics and its own emotional and intellectual stimulation and validity.

NOTE: These three major areas of experimentation will be undertaken simultaneously. As each develops and grows it is hoped and intended that it will benefit from the free flow of information coming from the other areas of investigation. As in all well-planned experimental work the total is more than the sum of the parts.

## V. SUMMARY

They say that when Thomas Edison was working on one of his electrical inventions, a discouraged young assistant came to him and complained: "We aren't going anywhere -- why on one project alone we've had more than two thousand failures." "That's fantastic," said Edison, "We now know two thousand things that definitely don't work." In art as well as in science, the success of experimentation depends on the vision behind it and the perseverance of that vision which results in producing and recognizing that precious handful of experiments that do work, and in applying them. While the Lab did not have two thousand failures in our first eight months, we did have our share. It was a time of learning, searching and beginning to define our role and our relationship with WNET. We now have a much clearer idea of the function of a Lab within the context of a television station and national production center. There are still tremendously complex aspects of our operation, including the union area, which have yet to be fully clarified or realized. But anything that is experimental, must be so in all its aspects, and in our case that includes relationships involving technicians and engineers

as well as artists. Already the contribution of technicians and engineers has been a vital part of the growth of the Lab.

Our outline of future goals reflects the summation of our experiences until now, and the three areas which offer us the opportunity for maximum impact on the growth of TV as a creative medium and a medium of serious artistic expression and dissemination of ideas. Three years from now we may have reached our two thousandth mistake. But the investigation of television is a scientific and artistic process which we expect to produce results. As a hub of activity in this special city, the Lab will be a place to practice and rehearse, to imagine and to dream and also to produce foreseeable and unforeseeable ideas and entities which will continue the evolution of the most extraordinary tool of communication that mankind has yet devised.

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